

# BEM: THE CALL FOR A JUDGMENT UPON THE CHURCHES AND THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT

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## I

Everyone involved in the ecumenical movement knows that the document called *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* is the fruit of a very long process of studies, discussions, and consultations stretching back to the first Faith and Order Conference at Lausanne, 1927.

It is also important to understand that the "reception" of this document is not already the end of the ecumenical pilgrimage towards a true and full communion of the Christian communities. BEM is intended to initiate a new dynamism. It does this by being a sign which stands at the main crossroads of the ecumenical task and this sign, visible from everywhere, is such that there will be no escape from it. Everybody who seriously cares and works for the ecumenical movement has to look upon this theological convergence as a "way ahead" for God's people.

From Lima, 1982, the whole ecumenical movement (not only the World Council of Churches) is facing a quite new situation. For the first time in its history, the movement possesses an official document which was unanimously approved by the delegates of all the Christian confessions belonging to the Commission on Faith and Order, the oldest tradition of the World Council. Everybody knows that the churches which have not joined the World Council, i.e., the Roman Catholic Church, are nevertheless full members of the Faith and Order Commission. Through many consultations and studies, local communities as well as theologians of all the member churches have been involved in the preparation of the final document. Consequently, BEM is more than a document of the World Council of Churches. It is—thanks to this Council and through one of its principal commissions—a document of the whole ecumenical movement. This distinction is very important.

This means that for the first time since the Western Reformation, even since the great division between East and West, delegates of all the communities and churches of the divided Christendom found themselves able to affirm together a common view about doctrinal issues which were for centuries at the heart of their polemics and oppositions. In making possible this common declaration and in initiating the researches and studies which led to such an important document, Faith and Order was fulfilling its own

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mandate. It has to be an instrument to help the churches to grow together towards the full reconstruction of the visible unity God wills for his Church. The by-laws of the commission say:

The aim of the Commission is to proclaim the oneness of the Church of Jesus Christ and to call the churches to the goal of visible unity in one faith and one eucharistic fellowship expressed in worship and in common life in Christ, in order that the world may believe.

In Lima something happened to express this mandate. A first step towards visible unity has already been made and, even if this step is only a document and not yet an official common decision, it is nevertheless more than a mere collection of opinions. It contains a common statement concerning what the delegates of all the churches involved in the quest for unity consider as something that must be accepted by all the Christian communities if unity is to be concretely realized. This is the sign at the crossroads. Christian communities have to choose between continuing to dream of unity (or speak of unity) and starting to lay the first stones of the bridge God wants them to build up over their division.

BEM is a statement asking for concrete decision. But it seems important to be clear about the nature of such a decision. The Faith and Order Commission is not addressing "the churches" as a vague and abstract entity. It speaks directly to each of these churches, as it is here and now. Moreover, it does not ask: Are you pleased with this paper? It asks: Do you recognize in this document the faith of the Church of God, which is supposed to be your faith? If a church's answer is affirmative, it will imply that this church enters the road indicated by Lima's directional arrow. But this road is not an easy one. It is a demanding way, the way of a difficult and perhaps radical, reformation.

In its final form BEM is now evidently calling for a specific step forward in the "obedience" of the Church of God to its authentic vocation. This vocation implies a faithfulness to God which includes the unity (*koinonia*) of the disciples of Christ as an essential and necessary element. The history of the first Christian communities, as recalled in the New Testament—for instance in the so-called Antioch dispute—shows how much this obedience is demanding. Unity is perhaps the most difficult of the evangelical commandments because it concerns not only persons but groups. Even the movements of reformation are mandated by this obedience.

This subordination of reformation to obedience is today especially crucial for the Western part of Christianity. After the 16th century, which revealed the will of the Reformers to rediscover the main thrust of the Gospel and create true "evangelical" communities, these communities are now confronted with a new challenge. This challenge is, in fact, a call to progress in this basic

desire of an authentic and profound Reformation. They are now called not only to establish ties of Christian friendship but to share everything they are and possess by evaluating their traditions, discovering what each one has to receive from and give to the others. This sharing makes possible the presence in every community of all the essential features required by the true nature of the Church of God. For this is a necessary condition for the building up of an authentic communion of "sister churches," who would be truly united not only in the confession of the one and same faith but also in the partaking of the same Eucharist where under the liturgical and cultural differences of expression, everyone may "recognize" an authentic celebration of the Lord's Supper.

On the other end, the "old churches"—churches of the East and the Roman Catholic Church—which carry the conviction that they have kept through centuries the essential elements of the Apostolic Church, are forced by BEM to look at other Christian communions with new eyes. For instance, if one Protestant community affirms unequivocally that it "recognizes" its own faith in the Lima statement, it will become impossible to consider this community as a group having broken all its links with the Apostolic Tradition. The Spirit of Christ is still living in this Protestant group. Consequently, it may be possible to find even in some of its specific doctrinal affirmations a true expression of the will of God for his Church. The old churches have to "receive" this will of God expressed through the requests of the so-called Reformed tradition. Yet such a "reception" means obedience.

The Lima document is so-calling for a new stage in the ecumenical metavoid. It is grounded in the certitude that after half a century of research and dialogue, and given the division of Christianity, it is no longer sufficient for a Christian community to reform itself internally in order to live in harmony with the main prescriptions of the Gospel. Efforts toward re-formation are connected with the re-building of Christian unity. A reformation which results in the strengthening or reinforcement of the walls separating one tradition from others is no longer faithful to the Gospel, even if it leads the members of this group to a more profound personal holiness. Obedience to the Gospel means a reformation in which the churches do everything they can to be reunited in one visible *koinonia*, that is, the fellowship of the one Church of God. All the baptized people faithful to the Christian way of life are, indeed, already united (*hen Christo*) in the invisible Church of God, the "Church of the elected," by the power of God's mercy. But the obedience of the churches has a broader object than the salvation of their own members. They have also to fulfill the explicit will of Christ "that they all may be one . . . and that the world may believe that thou has sent me" (John 17:21-24).

Obedience to this specific will is not a secondary feature in the mission of a Church. It belongs in its honesty to God, and then to its *état de grâce*. Moreover, this honesty concerns the churches in their

mutual and common mission. As long as they remain divided, unable to live together a true community of faith expressed in the sharing of a common Eucharist, they are not what they are supposed to be. They are all marked by this failure, even if some of them are convinced they possess everything that is required to be truly the Church of God. For this mission does not consist in an *addition* of faithfulness but in a *common* faithfulness. The directional arrow of BEM at the crossroads points toward what has been discovered as the way to achieve this *common* faithfulness.

So the BEM document is offered by Faith and Order to the Christian communities in order to make possible a new and universal Reformation embracing all the Christian traditions—Orthodox, Roman Catholic, as well as Protestant. The goal of such a Reformation is as evangelical as was the intention of Gregory the Great, Martin Luther, John Wesley, Khomiakoff, John XXIII. It is nothing else than the obedience of all Christians to the will of Christ. This will is now very clear: evangelical *koinonia* is neither an unattainable ideal nor the peculiar vocation of some specific groups of baptized people; it is what all the churches have to achieve *together* to be honest to God.

Faith and Order does not pretend to be infallible. This is why the Lima document is sent together with some questions, asking for clarifications. Moreover, according to the Toronto declaration, the World Council of Churches has not the power to require any kind of obedience to its own doctrinal statements. It is not "the Reunited Church" and it does not possess an authentic magisterial authority. This is true also for Faith and Order even if its membership is broader. Nevertheless, Faith and Order is convinced that BEM expresses and articulates at least the mainstream of the authentic Christian understanding of the true faith.

Let us be clear and plead for ecclesiological seriousness, even if this seriousness may appear a bit provocative. We all believe the Holy Spirit is still present and active in all the Christian communities, despite their disunion. We are all convinced that it is this Holy Spirit who inspires the ecumenical movement. The methodology of the work of Faith and Order, since 1927, was anchored in these two strong certitudes. Throughout its fifty years of work, and especially during the last decades, it always tried to listen, understand, study the content of the *sensus fidelium* which is the fruit of the action of the Spirit in the hearts of the true believers. It refused to consult only the treatises and dissertations of scholars but wanted to have its drafts sent to the churches, discussed by "the people in the pew," judged by theologians in touch with the pastoral concerns of their own community. It always considered its work as a ministerial endeavor not as a piece of intellectual scholarship. This gives a strong support to the conviction that at least the main thrust of the Lima statement has a guarantee.

The Holy Spirit, if really active in the ecumenical field, must have something to do with the Lima text. If the Holy Spirit is not at

work, somehow, during these fifty years in Faith and Order, the credibility of the whole ecumenical task is at stake; it will be impossible to have *any* confidence in the validity of *any* ecumenical statement.

What we just recalled reveals the importance attached to the reception of BEM. The churches are not asked to judge abstractly such a document as Christian groups wrapped in the conscience of their own righteousness. Such a response would be an easy way to avoid the demand of the Gospel. The churches have to discover that if they accept to be profoundly challenged by the intention, the content, and the thrust of this first official ecumenical *convergence* produced by the contribution of all the churches of the broken Christianity, they must decide to give priority to the desire of the Spirit of God over their own fears.

## II

BEM speaks of visible unity as the ultimate goal of the whole ecumenical task. It is evident that this visible unity does not mean a uniformity which stifles all differences, suppressing the richness of the diverse traditions, concealing the identity of each community. What Faith and Order wants to destroy is not diversity but division. In other words, it seeks a *koinonia* in which a strong unity in the essential element of Christian faith makes possible a large diversity in everything deriving from this kernel. Here the notion of "recognition" appears to be most important for the next decade of the ecumenical task. In what an African church or an Orthodox Eastern church does and proclaims in its own cultural ethos and historical background, a Western church must "recognize" its own faith, and vice versa. In other words, BEM does not want the Orthodox churches to adopt the so-called Lima Liturgy. It wants them to become able to recognize their own eucharistic faith in every celebration based on this model and consequently, in every community proclaiming that the Lima rite, rightly explained and performed, expresses its own understanding of the "do this in memory of me." In the same way, when BEM deals with *episcopé* it does not intend a reproduction of the Anglican or Roman Catholic model in all the Christian communities. It wants these communities to possess a ministry in which Anglicans or Catholics may recognize all the essential features of their own ministry.

The catholicity of the Church of God appeals for this kind of *koinonia*. Because the Church must encompass all the authentic human values, in its "communion" the differences are as important as the common components. Nevertheless, the latter are fundamental. They constitute the basis on which the differences are grounded and held together. Thus these diversities may blossom as peculiar features of the ecclesial communities are truly united in the authentic fellowship God wills. Thanks to these essential and fundamental common elements, everything required to be really the

Church of God is existing within this or that historical inheritance, context, peculiar backgrounds, culture. Without them everything which is particular is seen as threatening or even disintegrating the *ut sint unum*. Rooted in the common elements are all the differences, the varieties, the diversities which display the profound richness of the *koinonia*. When we speak of "recognition", we then speak of the acknowledgment of the presence of all these essential common elements in the life of another Christian community, whatever the dissimilarities may be.

### III

How is it possible to discover what are those fundamental common elements which insure the presence of an authentic *koinonia* yet do not delete legitimate differences? Faith and Order came to believe—especially after the declarations of the Montreal World Conference on Faith and Order (1963) concerning Scripture and Tradition—that the only way ahead is to pay a special attention at one and the same time to the New Testament and to the centuries through which the churches struggled for remaining in *koinonia*. It is important to recall how, during these first centuries, the values at stake were precisely those "received from the Apostles", those expressing the explicit will of Christ. The nuances between heresy and schism were not what they are now. It is consequently crucial to find a clear picture of the doctrines that, in spite of tensions, difficulties, strong oppositions, did not break the "communion" with the Church of the Apostles. The results of this search provide us with a knowledge of what are the elements allowing for a life "in the one and same Church of God," notwithstanding the differences in customs, traditions, and theology. The reasons our forebearers broke fellowship are probably the same reasons we now have to come together after centuries of painful and scandalous divisions. These elements, preserved at any cost, are the backbone of Christian *koinonia*.

Some theologians of the Reformed churches think this recourse to the first centuries is too "catholic" (that is, Orthodox and Roman Catholic) to be really ecumenical. They judge it as a denial of the main insights of the great Reformers. This verdict was indeed foreseen by the authors of BEM. Therefore, they went back to the declarations of Montreal not only about the meaning but also the relevance of Tradition. Is it right to affirm that the Reformation "rejected and even proscribed the reference to Christian Tradition as a means to learn the true meaning of the Word of God"? Luther, Calvin, Melancthon, Cranmer were not so negative; they wanted only to preserve the supreme authority of Scripture. However that may be, after fifty years of ecumenical dialogue it is no longer possible to repeat, without nuances, the arguments and polemics of

the earlier centuries. The insights of recent discussions have to be included in the way one deals now with new items of the ecumenical agenda.

This fact explains why, in its endeavor to determine the mind of the first Tradition about what we described earlier in this article as the backbone of *koinonia*, the Faith and Order Commission used a very specific procedure. Through a long series of consultations involving representatives of the diverse traditions and especially by the sending of the preliminary drafts to all the groups concerned, asking for comments and amendments, Faith and Order tried to "receive the views of the churches." Together with this process, it searched to be aware of the real intention and mind of the Reformers when they rejected some of the traditional features of the Church. Moreover, Faith and Order wanted to hear how, in the light of the new ecumenical situation, the different churches are here and now looking at some of the burning issues of the past. Surely this appeal to Tradition was not a naive one. Its purpose is now to by-pass the positive results of the Reformation. Rather—and this has not been sufficiently explained—Faith and Order wanted to reintegrate these results within the fruits of the last fifty years of ecumenical research and dialogue. We already said that now the churches of the Reformation have to face lucidly a crucial question concerning their own identity. Do they consider the Reformation of the 16th century as the last and definitive stage in the repentance (*metanoia*) of a Church which, according to their doctrine is always reforming (*semper reformanda*)? By its methodology, based on the conviction that the faithfulness of the Church to the Gospel neither started with the Reformation nor is confined within the borders of the "protestant" communities, BEM challenges a very large portion of the Christian world. This challenge, however, is nothing else than the *raison d'être* of the ecumenical task.

If some churches reject BEM precisely because of the new way it goes back to the main convictions of the first Tradition, they shall implicitly affirm that everything done since Lausanne (1927) and even since the foundation of the World Council (1948) was on a wrong track. It is evident that the key concern of the ecumenical movement as such is not a dialogue or a coming-together internal to the Protestant Christianity. It is the dialogue and the encounter of the two main blocks of the divided Christendom, the first one identified with the so-called "old churches" (Orthodox, Roman Catholic), the second composed of the churches born because of the Western Reformation. Each group is indeed divided within itself. Eastern Orthodox churches are not in "communion" with the Roman Catholic Church; Lutherans are not in full "communion" with Baptists, Pentecostals, and other reformed groups. But the separations of the 16th century occurred in the Western church which was already cut off from the Eastern Orthodox churches. The most tragic split is certainly this separation of the Western Christianity from the Eastern one. This is why the presence and the

work of the Orthodox churches are so important for the faithfulness of the World Council to its genuine vocation. And it would be an injustice to forget that the first official desire for the creation of what is now the World Council of Churches came from Constantinople. But the main dividing issue between the "old churches" and the "Protestant churches" is precisely the meaning and authority of *the* Tradition. If the ecumenical dialogue is to bear fruit, it is clear that this question of *the* Tradition cannot be eluded.

For the first time in the history of the ecumenical movement Faith and Order offers to the churches a document and process in which—thanks to a new way of looking at the Tradition—all the results of the dialogue between the "old churches" and the "churches of the Reformation" as well as of the dialogue internal to each of these two blocks have been integrated. This is why the "reception" of BEM implies much more than an appreciation of its specific affirmations. It involves a judgment over the possibility of true ecumenical "growing together" towards fullness in truth. If one refuses any reappraisal of the Tradition, one thereby excludes the possibility of any serious steps forward on the ecumenical journey. This is true also for the "old churches." They can no longer rebuke the corrections or clarifications coming from the other ecclesial bodies, as soon as they have been estimated serious and coherent with Christian revelation. This is the case, for instance, with the notion of memorial (or *zikkaron*) which throws a new light on the whole reality of the Eucharist.

The Roman Catholic theologians were, indeed, active in this common effort for our affirmation of the backbone of Christian *koinonia*. Being members of a church which is at the same time an "old church" of the Tradition and the root of the Western Christianity, they were sometimes the only ones capable of reconciling views which apparently seem irreconcilable. This was evident, for instance, during the discussions on *episcopé* and episcopacy. Nevertheless it would be a great mistake to think that BEM is a document concerned only with the Western situation and the desire to unite Roman Catholics and Protestants. The document would have been achieved even without the participation of the Roman Catholic Church, and probably the final result would have been nearly similar to the Lima text, at least on the major issues. Since Lausanne Faith and Order's purpose has been the reunification of East and West, of Orthodox tradition and Protestant tradition, in one *koinonia* of faith and Eucharist. It is only since Vatican II and the Uppsala Assembly that the Catholic Church became an active participant in the work of Faith and Order. This reminder is very important for those who will have to help their church in its reception of BEM. The Eastern Orthodox churches cannot be forgotten, and their conceptions of sacraments and Tradition have to be taken into account as much as the Roman Catholic one. If the reception is to be truly ecumenical, it will have to be concerned



above all by the desire to "receive" through this document everything which seems essential not only to the divided Western Christian world but also to the other half of Christianity.

Such is the situation created by *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*. It would be naive to expect a reception marked by uncritical enthusiasm and universal approval. But to come back to our image, it is an arrow at the crossroads. Those churches who will not follow the sign will risk either arriving at a dead-end or discovering that they must return to the beginning of the ecumenical journey to see whether there exists another way. The future of ecumenism lies with BEM or an entirely new way will have to be found to manifest our visible unity. This reality brings judgment and challenge to the churches and to the ecumenical movement.

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